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FM REO BASRAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0961
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0537
RUEHBC/REO BASRAH 0999

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000002

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/31/2020
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: BASRAH ANTI-IRAN DEMONSTRATION: LESS THAN MEETS THE EYE

REF: A. BAGHDAD 112
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 70
[1](#)C. 09 BAGHDAD 3334
[1](#)D. BASRAH 61
[1](#)E. BASRAH 57

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CLASSIFIED BY: John Naland, PRT Team Leader, PRT, US State Department.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a Basrah reporting cable.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: Basrah-based representatives of political parties and tribes staged a brief and peaceful protest on January 2 at the Iranian Consulate to protest the reported December 18 Iranian occupation of the cross-border Al Fakkah oil well in nearby Maysan Province. Initial and unverifiable media reports claimed that three hundred or more participants raised banners and shouted anti-Iran slogans condemning the "Iranian occupation," called for the immediate withdrawal of Iranian forces, and condemned the GOI's own "acquiescence." Two prominent journalists provided a starkly different account of the demonstration, laughing at reports of "hundreds" of protestors. They characterized the crowd as only around 50-60 participants at the 30-minute event. For these journalists, the more relevant issue is the struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran to control the future of Iraq. End summary.

Al Fakkah takeover sparks reported fiery demonstration

[1](#)3. (C) On January 2, Basrah-based representatives of political parties and tribes staged a peaceful protest in front of the Iranian Consulate to protest the reported December 18 Iranian occupation of the cross-border al Fakkah well in nearby Maysan Province (refs A-C). Initial media reports claimed three hundred or more participants. (Note: The PRT's initial understanding of the event came from unverifiable media reports. PRTOffs cannot get near the Iranian Consulate without our military movement team drawing massive and unwanted attention. End note.)

[1](#)4. (C) According to these initial reports, the marchers raised banners and shouted anti-Iran slogans condemning "Iranian occupation" of the oil wells. The crowd called for the immediate withdrawal of Iranian forces from Iraqi territory in defense of Iraqi sovereignty and unity. One participant reportedly referred to the Iranian forces as invaders and occupiers of Iraqi resources and sucking Iraq's blood. The group also reportedly threatened further actions including a boycott of Iranian imports.

[1](#)5. (SBU) These protestors also reportedly condemned Prime Minister Maliki and the GOI for "acquiescence" in failing to take action against the "invasion," and demanded a strong GOI position against the violation of Iraqi sovereignty. They

described the GOI policy as "incredibly weak" and speculated that there were those within the GOI who support Iran's policies.

¶6. (C) The event's organizer, Awad al-Abdan, General Secretary of the Movement for the Liberation of the South, a small quasi-political organization, read a statement "on behalf of the masses of Basrah and southern Iraq." The declaration demanded Iranian forces stop interfering in Iraqi affairs and depart immediately from the oil well. For Abdan, the oil well was representative of Iraqi sovereignty and wealth.

¶7. (C) Others downplayed the significance of the event. Provincial Council member Walid Keitan, a Shi'a member of Allawi's Iraqi National Accord, said that the Al Fakkah incursion provided Abdan a "target of opportunity and something to raise a ruckus about." He suggested that the demonstration did not indicate a significant anti-Iran shift in Basrah.

Other participants

¶8. (C) Working with local journalists and based on discussion with Abdan, PRTOffs identified other participants at the protest. They included Hussein Al Sadr, General Secretary of the anti-Iran Al-Shaab (Population) party; followers of Vice President Tariq al Hashimi's Sunni Iraqi al-Tajdeed party; Dialogue Front party followers of Dr. Saleh al Mutlak; and some trade unions. In addition, local tribal sheikhs (and PRT contacts) included Mohammed al Bahadli (from Basrah's Hayyanayah neighborhood, ref E), a branch of the Al Bahdil tribe; and Mohammed al Zaydawi, from the (anti-Iran) Abu Zayd tribe in central Basrah province.

Abdan's outspoken views on Iran

¶9. (C) Al-Abdan, an occasional PRT contact, confirmed on January 15 that he had led the protest. Al-Abdan is a frequent and harsh critic of what he says is Iran's economic, cultural, and political dominance in southern Iraq. He claims that he seeks

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to "restore" Basrah's "lost rights." On the Al Fakkah incident, he said that in some ways it was a positive thing showing everyone Iran's "true colors." It is consistent with his view that Iran - and its Consul General in Basrah in particular - meddles in Iraqi internal affairs (ref D) and floods the local market with Iranian goods. He has twice led boycotts targeting Iranian imports. (Comment: It is unclear how possible or effective any boycott of Iranian goods could be. Low-priced Iranian goods represent a substantial percentage of local goods benefiting the Basrawi consumer. End comment).

Leading journalists describe an entirely different event

¶9. (C) Two prominent journalists offered PRTOffs a starkly different version from media accounts of the demonstration and Abdan himself. Mahmoud Bachari, Director of the Ihlas Haber Ajansi Turkish news agency in Basrah, characterized Abdan as "slippery" and a "charlatan" who is supported by outside interests, probably Saudi Arabia. He said that Abdan has unexplained wealth. Offering to share the video, he said that his studio is next door to the Iranian Consulate and he filmed the entire event. He laughed at media reports of "hundreds" of protestors and said there were 50-60 paid and transported participants at a 30-minute staged event. He said that Abdan paid Iraqi television station Al Sharqiya "around USD 1000" to have journalists cover the event and another USD 600 to broadcast the coverage. He suspects Saudi Arabia and/or Kuwait support Al Sharqiya. Subsequent internet accounts of a "massive demonstration" were simply recycled from the Al Sharqiya piece.

¶10. (C) Al Fayhaa television journalist Taleb al-Baderi's views largely coincided with those of Bachari. He said that Abdan changes his views and alliances and "is not an independent

player." He suggested that Abdan receives outside assistance and that many Basrawis believe this. Baderi said that his work on the story revealed that demonstration organizers sought a permit for the event from Governor Shiltagh, which the latter refused to grant despite a direct appeal from GOI VP al-Hashemi. The PRT's Bilingual and Bicultural Advisors working in the Provincial Governor's office also heard the same account of the events. Even without the permit, organizers went ahead and a quick "hit and run" event occurred before anyone could stop it. He added that Abdan "loves the limelight" and makes trouble because he and the rest of demonstrators are not benefiting from the "new Iraq."

The "real war" in Iraq today: Saudi Arabia vs. Iran

¶11. (C) Journalist Mahmoud Bachari broadened the context of this demonstration. He said it was part of the struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran to control the future of Iraq. "The United States always blames Iran for problems in Iraq, but it should look more at Saudi Arabia instead. In fact, it is sometimes Saudi Arabia that starts problems here, to which Iran reacts." He noted that at least some elements within Iran are trying to help Iraq in a more constructive, non-violent manner. As an example, he noted tactical alliances with sheikhs, and the provision of essential services - in the style of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, "does not want to see any Iraq 'democracy model' succeed," and thus is waging a "low-key war" against it.

Comment

¶12. (C) While the PRT cannot verify all of Bachari and Baderi's views, what is clear is that Abdan's "party" and following are relatively small. The PRT has noted a general uneasiness among some Basrawis about Iran's perceived outsized economic and political influence, but there is no one-size-fits-all "Basrah view" of Iran. Given the vast and complex economic, religious, and cultural ties that bind them, there is no easily generalized "Basrah view" of Iran. Most Basrawis are too overwhelmed by the daily grind to form more than personal and cursory views of Iran.

¶13. (C) As for the protest itself, the PRT does not believe that there was great "meaning" to it. The fact that there is an apparent toleration in Basrah's public space for groups to peacefully blow off occasional steam is a good thing, irrespective of just how "spontaneous" or genuine this particular march actually was. Such events were unthinkable under the old regime.
NALAND